

Searching for a strategy

BY MILAN VEGO

The very core of the Navy's transformation is Sea Power 21. The Navy is making a major effort to create a new maritime strategy, to be formally completed in June. Perhaps it is also necessary to refocus, modify and refine its Sea Power 21 concept. Unveiled in June 2002 by former Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Vern Clark, this vision for the 21st century was subsequently explained in more detail in "Naval Transformation Roadmap 2003: Assured Access & Power Projection ... From the Sea" and in a series of subsequent articles written by several high-ranking officials, mostly published in the Naval Institute's Proceedings.

Sea Power 21 comprises three main components — Sea Strike, Sea Shield and Sea Basing — linked with an overarching command-and-control system, dubbed FORCENet. Closely related to Sea Power 21 is the new organization of seagoing forces, "Global Concept of Operations," and several other transformational processes (Sea Warrior, Sea Trial, Sea Enterprise, etc.) and new methods of deployment of naval forces.

Sea Power 21 is hard to properly classify as a white paper, a strategic vision paper or just a paper intended to secure sufficient budgetary resources for the Navy in the future. It does not provide a strategic vision for the Navy in this century in a true sense, because it contains few elements of maritime strategy. The concept focuses almost exclusively on the tactical, not operational, level of war at sea. Hence, the Navy's objectives in war and operations short of war, and methods of their accomplishment, are largely left unaddressed. Moreover, tactics of combined naval arms are given short shrift; most of the attention is on the tactics of platforms and weapons/sensors in particular. The tactical focus is clear by the repeated use of various tactical (rather than operational) terms such as "sea strike," "time-sensitive strikes," "battle space," etc. The obsession with technology is also too obvious.

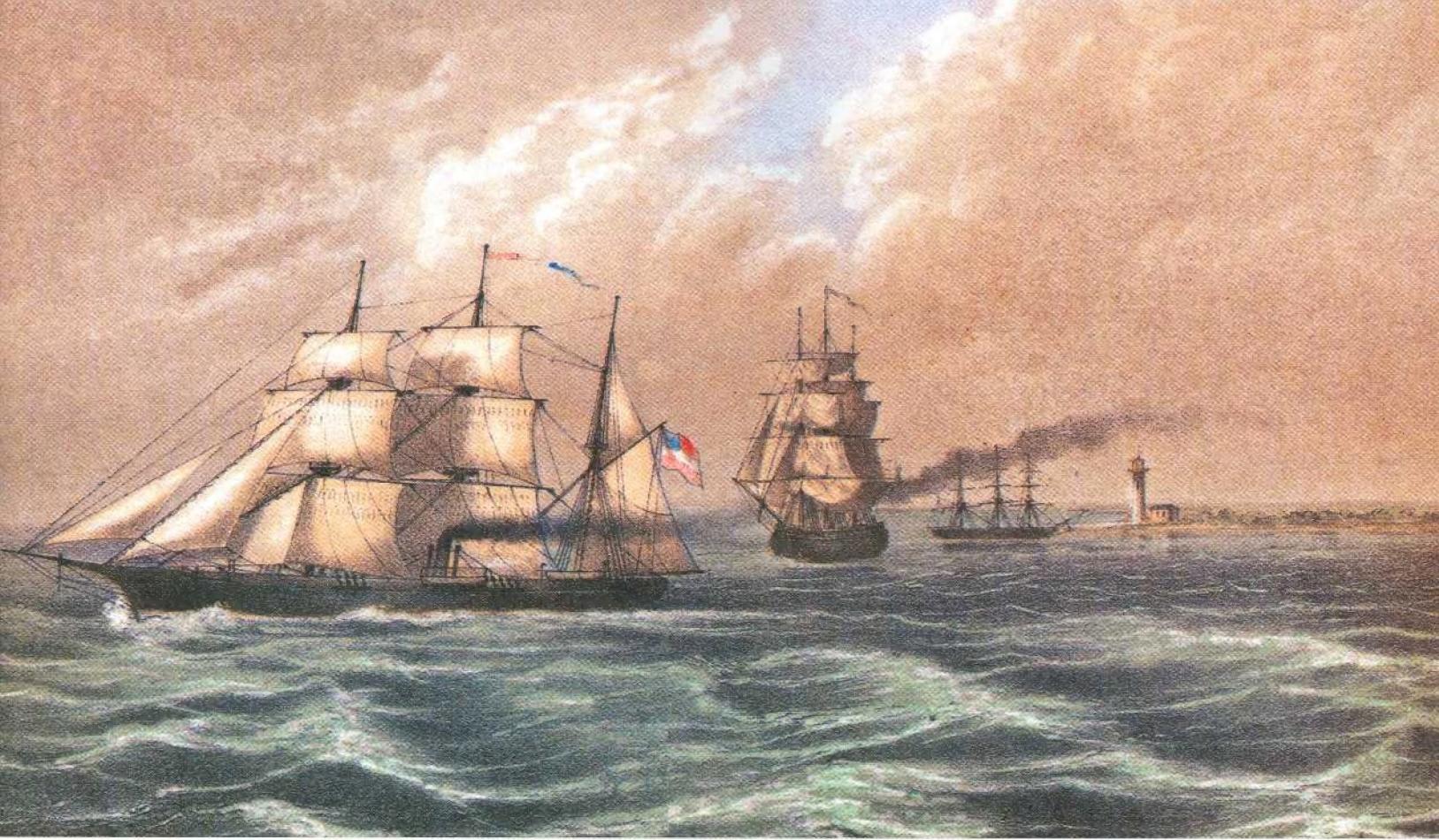
In terms of structure, Sea Power 21 is rigid, because it arbi-

trarily compresses the entire spectrum of warfare at sea into four components. No clear distinction is made between the Navy's tasks in the case of a high-intensity war against a relatively strong opponent and operations short of war, such as peace enforcement, support of an insurgency or counterinsurgency, and the so-called global war on terrorism (more accurately, the war against pan-Islamic fascism). A more serious problem is that some critically important aspects of warfare at sea are not addressed. For example, defense and protection of friendly maritime trade are not discussed. Also, there is no discussion of another important Navy task: attack on enemy maritime trade. Sea Strike, as its title implies, is clearly focused on tactics. It consists of elements that are complementary but don't belong to it. Littoral sea control, which is one of the Navy's main prerequisites for all other operations in the littoral, is included as part of the so-called Sea Shield, which implies that this task is defensive. Yet sea control is inherently an offensive objective. The term "joint" is mentioned many times but usually in association with a certain technical system, not as a method of combat employment of naval forces.

TACTICAL VERSUS OPERATIONAL

Sea Power 21 should have focused on the operational rather than the tactical level of war at sea if the intent was to present the vision of the future. Wars at sea are won not by tactical victories alone but by orchestrating these successes to serve the purpose of strategy through the application of operational art. The military objectives to be accomplished determine the levels of war at which one's combat forces are employed. Hence, three basic levels of war are differentiated: tactical, operational

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CORBIS

The Confederate warship Sumter runs the Union blockade at the Mississippi Delta's Pass a l'Outre in June 1861. Naval blockades are one of the primary methods of maintaining sea control.

and strategic. They are conducted on land, in the air and at sea. In U.S. terms, the operational level of war at sea is conducted to accomplish a single theater-strategic objective through the planning and conduct of a single maritime campaign. Such a campaign in a high-intensity conflict comprises a series of major operations conducted predominantly by a single service or several services, synchronized in terms of place. A maritime campaign is planned and conducted by a joint-force commander in accordance with a common operational idea. The Navy's forces can also be employed in support of a land campaign, as they were in the wars in Afghanistan in 2001-2002 and Iraq in 2003. The operational level of war is conducted in a formally (or informally) declared maritime theater of operations.

BLUE-WATER OBJECTIVES

Traditionally, the objective of any blue-water navy has been, in the case of war or, sometimes, in operations short of war, to obtain and then maintain and exercise control in a specific part of the maritime theater. These objectives are an integral part of a war's overall objectives. The phrase "command of the sea" is too absolute, because it implies the ability to control the sea in all its dimensions and for an indefinite period of time. Hence, the broader and more relative term "sea control" is used today. In terms of the factor of space, sea control can be general or local; it can encompass control of the surface, the subsurface and the air. In terms of the factor of force, sea con-

trol can be absolute, working or disputed (or contested). In terms of its scope, a stronger side can possess sea (or maritime) superiority or sea supremacy. The weaker side usually opts to conduct sea denial. In terms of the factor of time, sea control can be permanent or temporary. Sea control, properly understood, refers only to the strategic or operational, not tactical, levels of war. In practical terms, strategic sea control pertains to the entire maritime theater. Control of a major part of a maritime theater represents operational sea control. The Navy's term "battle space dominance" clearly refers to a tactical, not operational or strategic, level of war at sea, because it deals with temporary control of a part of a maritime theater in which one's forces are engaged in accomplishing some major tactical objective.

Sea Power 21 wrongly assumes that the Navy will enjoy sea control on the open ocean or in the littorals by virtue of its forward presence. Even the term "global sea control" is used; this is clearly an exaggeration. In times of peace, any navy, regardless of its size or combat strength, has almost unlimited access to any sea or ocean area within its effective range. The Navy's forward presence is conducted with full respect for international treaties and conventions and without violating the territorial waters of other countries. Its forward presence is one of the prerequisites for obtaining sea control after the start of hostilities. The struggle to obtain sea control starts only after the opening of hostilities.

The Sea Shield component includes littoral sea control, sur-

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face warfare and anti-submarine warfare (ASW). Surface warfare is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of the Navy's tasks; some are predominantly offensive, and others, such as defense of friendly maritime trade, are largely defensive. ASW, in contrast, is mainly offensive in character and is an integral part of sea control on the open ocean or in the littorals. The Navy's Future ASW Warfighting Vision will center on establishing so-called protected passages of the sea lines of communications and transit of friendly forces, maintaining a maritime shield to deny enemy submarines access to one's own operating areas, and "holding at risk" enemy submarines theaterwide. The objective of ASW is to gain maritime superiority by rapidly finding and destroying or, where necessary, avoiding them. Sea Power 21 apparently ignores the laws of physics, because ASW is inherently extremely complex; to be successful, it requires diverse forces and assets, lots of effort and much time.

OBTAINING SEA CONTROL

Sea Strike is the only purely offensive component of Sea Power 21. Yet, as its title implies, it is purely a tactical concept. The Navy will carry out "time-sensitive strikes" with "precise" lethal effect against "operationally" significant targets within minutes — and ultimately within seconds — of target detection. Supposedly this capability will allow the Navy to reduce the sensor-to-shooter closure to seconds instead of hours or minutes. Netted fires and automated decision aids will accelerate the launching of precision attacks on critical targets to create appropriate effects. It is unclear whether these strikes will be aimed to obtain, maintain or exercise sea control. Regardless of the purpose of these strikes, the concept is clearly focused on the tactics of naval combat arms, platforms/weapons in particular. Also, hitting operational targets is not the same as accomplishing operational objectives in war at sea. Conducting time-sensitive strikes might be successful against suspected terrorists or a weak-to-nonexistent enemy navy but not against a much stronger and more skillful opponent.

The main methods of obtaining sea control in a certain sea or ocean area traditionally have included the destruction or neutralization of the enemy fleet at sea and/or in its bases, and naval blockade. Destroying the enemy's naval forces is the most direct and effective means of obtaining control of operationally or strategically important areas. The most effective and quickest way of accomplishing this is through the planning and execution of a series of major naval and joint/combined operations, not tactical or operational strikes as envisaged in Sea

Strike. Only major operations allow the massed, coordinated concentration of forces with the objective of quickly destroying enemy forces to change the operational situation to one's advantage. Each major naval operation consists, in turn, of a series of related tactical actions (naval battles, engagements, strikes, attacks, etc.), sequenced and synchronized in terms of place and time, and aimed to accomplish an operational — and sometimes even a major part of the strategic — objective. Major naval operations should be planned and executed by a joint force commander and based on a common operational idea. Major naval operations have been proven to be the most effective method of employing one's naval forces to accomplish operational objectives at sea relatively quickly and with the fewest losses. They are normally an integral part of a maritime or land campaign, but they can sometimes be conducted outside the framework of a campaign.

Major naval operations will be predominantly conducted by the Navy in the littoral waters and rarely on the open ocean. In the littorals, such operations will be predominantly joint or combined, because they will involve the participation of not only the Navy and Marines but also the other U.S. services and those of our allies or coalition partners. In short, they will be joint and often combined in character. Specifically, the main purpose of major naval/joint operations conducted by the Navy can be aimed to annihilate the enemy's fleet at sea or its bases, neutralize the enemy's fleet by establishing a naval blockade of a sea's exits or the larger part of the enemy's coast, seize control of a strait, narrows or some other operationally significant position within an enclosed or semi-enclosed sea, or capture the enemy's naval basing areas.

MAINTAINING SEA CONTROL

By obtaining sea control in a specific part of a maritime theater, the Navy would accomplish an operational objective and a major part of the strategic objective. The next step is to consolidate this operational and strategic success, employing naval combat forces to maintain the desired degree of sea control; otherwise, that control will be lost again, because a strong and offensively minded opponent would make all efforts not only to contest control but also to obtain sea control for himself. This phase requires a different series of tasks for the Navy than those carried out in obtaining sea control. For one thing, the intensity of one's effort in maintaining control is usually significantly lower than in obtaining control. Hence, the majority of the actions of the Navy and other services would be tactical in scale.

Sea Power 21 does not explain clearly how the Navy would exercise sea control once it has obtained it. Sea Strike includes ship-to-objective maneuver (STOM), which is a component of the Marine Corps' operational maneuver from the sea (OMFTS). Yet, for some reason, the focus is on STOM, which is a purely tactical concept, not its larger and more important operational framework, OMFTS. The latter envisages amphibious landing operations to accomplish operational objectives deep on the enemy's coast.

The Navy would normally start exercising sea control in a certain part of the open ocean or a narrow sea as soon as a certain degree of sea control is obtained in a specific part of the theater. In operational terms, this phase pertains to exploiting operational or strategic success. Often, the tasks of maintaining and exercising sea control are carried out simultaneously. The situation in a given theater and the balance of the opposing forces would be primary factors in determining in which sequence and in which areas any of these tasks would be carried out. In projecting power ashore, the Navy would carry out several operational tasks, such as carrying out large-scale amphibious landings, posing the threat of amphibious landings, destroying the enemy's coastal installations and facilities, and destroying the enemy's political and military-economic sources of powers in the strategic depth of the enemy's territory. Exercising sea control is usually accomplished by planning and executing a series of major naval/joint operations and tactical actions.

Sea Basing is an enabling concept for expeditionary maneuver warfare, specifically STOM/OMFTS and other expeditionary concepts. However, a number of problems must be resolved before this revolutionary concept can be fully realized. Among other things, the planned capabilities seem to be overly ambitious. Despite all the advances in technologies, there is still — and there will be for the foreseeable future — a great need for secure beachheads, ports and airfields. The Sea Basing concept will require significantly expanded fuel and storage capabilities afloat and, therefore, will lead to a need for much larger logistics ships. If carried out to its extreme, the concept would essentially force the U.S. to act and operate without allies or coalition partners in the case of some regional conflict. Such a lack of realism is baffling. No problem can be resolved by relying exclusively or predominantly on technology. The assumption that U.S. naval forces will operate without coalition partners and with-

NAVY



Sea Power 21 makes the dangerous assumption that the Navy will enjoy sea control by virtue of its forward presence.

out access to nearby ports and airfields is dangerous to U.S. interests. The recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq show the falsity of such assumptions.

ATTACKING ENEMY MARITIME TRADE

Sea Power 21's most glaring omission is the lack of any discussion of attack on enemy maritime trade. Surface warfare, included as an element of Sea Shield, also deals with actions aimed to weaken the enemy's military-economic potential through attacks on the various elements of enemy maritime trade. This task is normally carried out for the entire duration of a war. Likewise, the defense and protection of friendly maritime trade is one of the most critical operational tasks of any navy in time of war and often also in operations short of war. Yet Sea Power 21 makes only passing reference to that rather complex but critical task. The protection of sealift gets more attention — another proof that the focus is more on offensive aspects of naval warfare. However, defense and protection of

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friendly maritime trade is a combination of defensive and offensive actions. Today, both attacks on and defense and protection of maritime trade will be conducted with the forces of all services, not just the Navy. This is particularly true in littoral warfare.

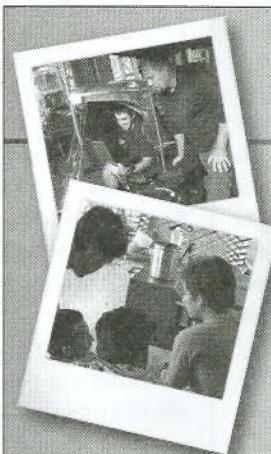
Sea Power 21 groups a number of elements that are applied throughout the entire spectrum of conflict. For example, ISR and information operations are conducted in peacetime and throughout war. Yet for some reason, both are included as part of Sea Strike. FORCENet is considered a separate and overarching component for all three other components of Sea Power 21. Yet this purely technical system should properly be viewed as an aid to the decision-making and planning of naval operational commanders.

Sea Power 21 needs to be thoroughly reassessed after the work on the new maritime strategy is completed. Some elements of Sea Power 21, specifically OMFTS/STOM and Sea Basing, provide sound direction for the future. Sea Strike and Sea Shield are predominantly focused on the tactical level of war. The Sea Power 21 concept is also too rigid. Its division into four main components (with their buzzwords) should be abandoned to provide the necessary flexibility in presenting a more comprehensive vision of the Navy in war at sea. The Navy needs to re-embrace the classical view of naval warfare. Too much emphasis is given to the offensive instead of to both the offensive and so-called defensive aspects of warfare at sea. Far more attention and resources should be given to such critical tasks as defense and pro-

tection of friendly maritime trade and mine warfare — mine countermeasures in particular. The Navy's focus should be unambiguously on the operational level of war at sea. Hence, Sea Power 21 should provide the vision for the employment of naval forces and Marines across the spectrum of conflict, from operations short of war to conventional high-intensity warfare. This means the Navy should explain its views on how to obtain, maintain and exercise sea control. The Navy might also find itself called upon to conduct sea denial in some ocean or sea area where its forces might be too weak to obtain sea control. It should focus on major joint/combined operations in the littorals instead of those on the open ocean.

The excessive attention to tactics and obsession with technological solutions to the complexities of modern naval warfare should be reversed. All wars are won at the operational and strategic levels. No amount of tactical victories can lead to ultimate victory if the opponent thinks operationally and employs its forces with greater skill and determination. Sooner or later, a strong opponent at sea will emerge who might not match the Navy in terms of advanced weapons and tactics but who will think operationally and fight smarter.

Of course, the emphasis on the operational level of war does not mean neglecting tactics or reducing the Navy's resources in fielding new technologies and highly capable platforms. What is urgently needed is to bring into balance both the understanding and performance of the Navy across all levels of war at sea. **AFJ**



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